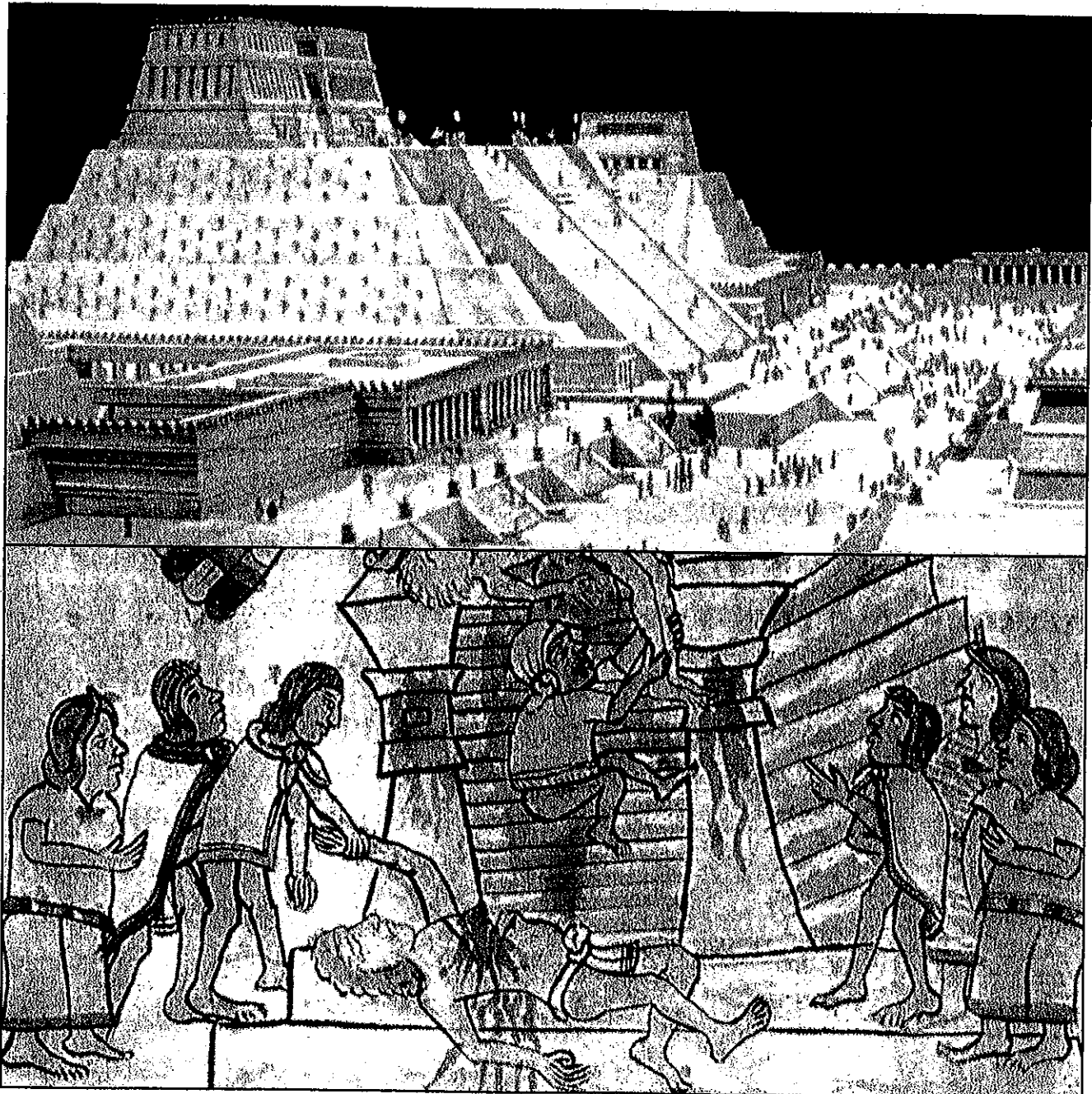

The Aztecs: What Should History Say?

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A Document Based Question (DBQ)
World History

STUDENT GUIDE SHEET

The Aztecs: What Should History Say?

Directions: In 1519 Hernan Cortes and 500 Spanish conquistadors arrived in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. But this document based question focuses entirely on Aztec culture before the Spanish arrival. Who were the Aztec people? How did they live? What is important for us to remember about them? The Background Essay and the 17 documents that follow will help you answer this question.

It is suggested that you follow these steps:

1. Read the Background Essay.
2. Skim through the documents to get a sense of what they are about.
3. Read the documents slowly. In the margin or on a Document Analysis Sheet record the main idea of each document.
4. Organize the documents by analytical category. One or more documents may provide context. The categories might be different aspects of Aztec life.
5. Within each category, decide whether, in your opinion, Aztec practice or belief was positive or negative and whether or not it deserves emphasis in a written history of the Aztec people. Be able to explain each opinion citing concrete evidence.
6. Develop a summary answer to the question.

The Documents:

- Document A: Carrasco: A Plea for Pre-Conquest Social History
- Document B: Aztec Calendar (drawing and account)
- Document C: Growth of the Aztec Empire (map)
- Document D: Justification for Aztec Reign Over Central Mexico (drawing)
- Document E: Itzcoatl and Tlacacl Adjust Aztec History
- Document F: Tenochtitlan (two images)
- Document G: Ritual Sacrifice (drawing and account)
- Document H: A Young Scribe's Impressions of Ritual Sacrifice
- Document I: The Scale of Sacrifice (drawing)
- Document J: Understanding Aztec Sacrifice
- Document K: Chinampas Agriculture (drawings)
- Document L: Diego Rivera Mural
- Document M: Tribute Demands (drawing)
- Document N: The Market of Tenochtitlan
- Document O: Childhood, Marriage, and Discipline
- Document P: Social Expectations of a Young Man
- Document Q: Social Customs When a Woman Gives Birth

The Aztecs: What Should History Say?

Introduction

At the same time that the Renaissance was unfolding in Europe, the Aztecs were creating a remarkable world-class society in the Americas. The years were 1350 to 1519. The place was the present-day site of Mexico City.

Frequently, we begin our study of the Aztecs in 1519, the year Hernan Cortes and approximately five hundred Spanish **conquistadors** first entered the Aztec capital of **Tenochtitlan**. The story of Cortes' conquest of the Aztecs is riveting, but it should never overshadow the story of the people he defeated.

The question of who the Aztecs were before the Spanish is the focus of this DBQ. Who were the Aztecs? How did they live? What did they value?

Something Called Historiography

Understanding any civilization is challenging. Civilizations are complex societies with interwoven systems of government, religion, social rules, and economic practices. At the people level, civilizations are made up of individuals, each with a private life, each with different capacities for building community or creating mayhem. Given the complexity, the size, and two-hundred-year longevity of the Aztecs, we should not expect a smoothly ironed history. There will be wrinkles – some triumphs, some losses; some goods, some bads; some beauty, some ugliness.

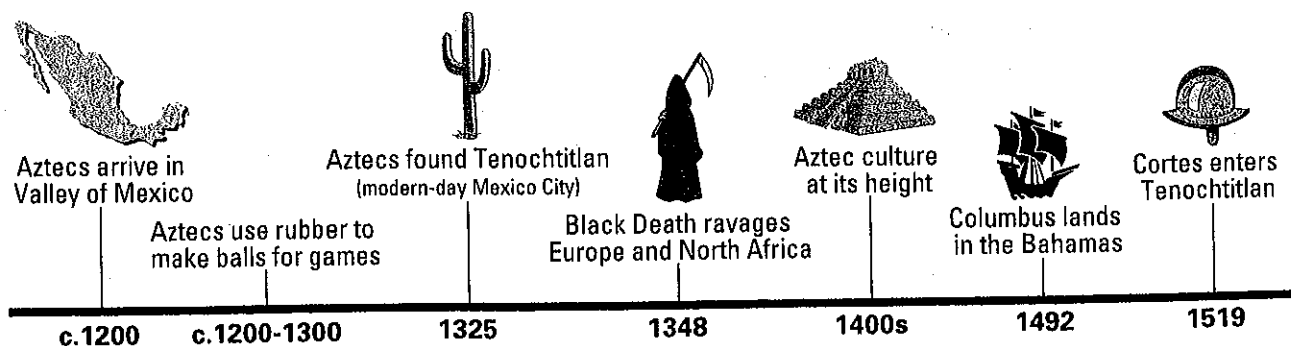
Cortes' conquest buried Aztec culture under a thick layer of things Spanish – Christianity,

the Spanish language, the Spanish government. When a civilization has been covered like this for nearly five hundred years, understanding that culture is even more difficult. Piece by piece, hidden artifacts get unearthed, old texts get rediscovered in old libraries. Not surprisingly, new generations of historians examine this fresh evidence and reshape the old stories. Historians call this phenomenon historiography. Historiography is the study of how stories about the past change over time.

Many of the early conquistadors such as Hernan Cortes emphasized the ease and the necessity of the conquest. The Aztecs were primitive; worse, they were not Christian. The telling of the story was used to justify Spanish colonial rule during this period. Cortes downplayed Aztec accomplishments.

Contrast this with the nineteenth century historian, William H. Prescott. Prescott wrote *A History of the Conquest of Mexico* that became a classic in the history of Latin America. He emphasized the achievements of the Aztecs in comparison with other less organized civilizations. Prescott noted that although the Aztec empire was not as large as some in Europe, it was "truly wonderful." He compared the Aztecs to "the ancient Romans, not only in their military successes, but in the policy which led to them."

Whether the Aztecs were barbaric, in need of civilizing, or "wonderful" like the Romans, depends in large measure on what historians choose to emphasize about them.



Geography

Whatever slant a historian may take on the Aztecs, one begins with the geography of the Aztec homeland. The Aztecs lived in a small basin about the size of Rhode Island. It is the location of modern-day Mexico City. The basin is nestled in a high plateau that is more than a mile above sea level. In Aztec times, the basin collected water from mountain springs, snowmelt and rains, and formed five lakes that in wet years could become a great single sheet of water. These shallow lakes were one to three meters in depth and provided the people with incredible irrigation possibilities for farming.

But what geography and nature give can also be taken away. The Aztecs lived in a high-altitude world, balanced between a rainy season of plenty and a dry season of limited resources. Drought was always a

threat. Eighty percent of their annual rainfall came between June and October, followed by frosts from as early as September to as late as May. The unpredictable weather made life uncertain. Even with elaborate calendars that helped to schedule planting and harvesting, life could be difficult.

Early Political History

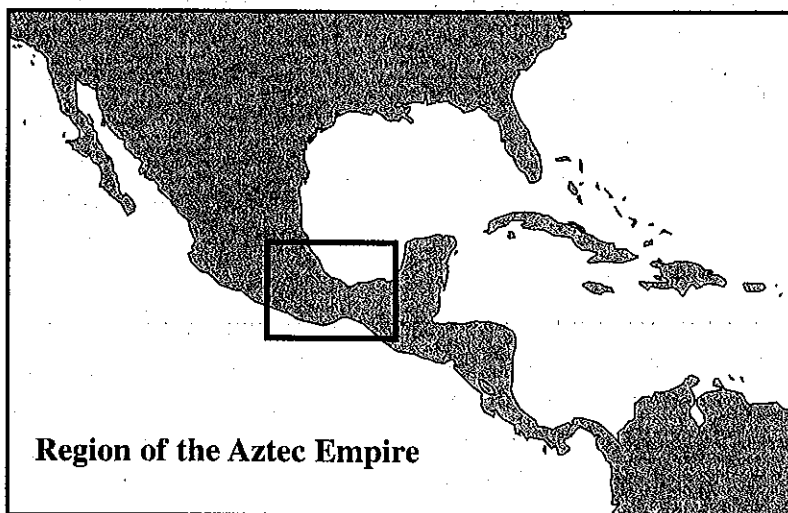
The Aztecs were a group of about ten thousand people who migrated to the shores of Lake Texcoco two or three centuries before 1325 CE. When they arrived, there were already many groups of farmers living in the lake area of central Mexico. These farming peoples were thriving economically and competing with each other for power and resources. At first, the Aztecs were distrusted and disliked because they were militaristic and tended to push others

out of their way. Residents saw the newcomers as tough warriors and fanatical followers of their gods. And in fact, by the 1430s, the Aztecs were demanding tribute and military support from people in the entire region. While population estimates for the empire vary, historians believe that the rulers in Tenochtitlan eventually controlled more than ten million people. Some estimates run as high as twenty million.

Society and Religion

Like most ancient civilizations, Aztec social structure was hierarchical. The base of the social pyramid was formed by masses of agricultural workers and commoners who served as artisans,

scribes, and urban workers. This large group supported a smaller number of merchants, warriors, and priests who formed the narrower middle section of society. Most women occupied one of



these bottom two tiers in the social pyramid. Near the peak of the Aztec social pyramid was a rather sizable group of nobles, high-level warriors, artists, and priests. At the very top sat the ruler surrounded by his entourage of servants and advisors. Most citizens believed that these men possessed supernatural powers that gave them the authority to rule over the others.

Aztec religion included at least 128 major deities including gods of rain, fire, water, corn, the sky, and the sun. The most important god, **Huitzilopochtli**, was the Aztec sun god who struggled to keep the night at bay and to bring warmth to the world. Huitzilopochtli needed strength in order to carry out his duties and this led to some disturbing practices.

The Sources

Finding out about Aztec life in the years before the Spanish arrived is challenging. Most Aztec records about their own civilization were destroyed before or during the conquest. We are fortunate to have the following sources:

- Bernardino de Sahagun was born in Spain in 1499 and traveled to New Spain as a Franciscan monk in 1529. Sahagun learned the native Aztec language, **Nahuatl**, and produced several written accounts of Aztec culture including a collection of twelve books called the *Florentine Codex*, written in Nahuatl.
- Friar Diego Duran was a Dominican priest born in Spain in 1537. He was brought to New Spain as a young boy and spent his youth in Texcoco and Mexico City before entering the priesthood in 1556. Duran was fascinated by Aztec culture. He wrote what historians generally accept as the most complete historical account of the Mexica or Aztec people.
- Even after the conquest, native scholars saved various pictures that Aztec artists and scribes had made. Although they did not write their native Nahuatl (except for basic record-keeping, Nahuatl was a spoken language only), their pictures serve as excellent sources on Aztec ideas and expectations.
- Conquistadors such as Hernan Cortes or Bernal Diaz del Castillo also provided a surprising amount of information. While it is important to treat conquerors' observations with caution, their observations frequently confirm information found in other sources.

- A final important resource is the archaeological record. Aztec construction techniques and design, styles of pottery making, types of clay and precious stones, and jewelry design help us understand and appreciate the scope of Aztec culture.

The Question

What we know about the pre-conquest political, economic, social, and religious traditions of the Aztecs thus comes from a variety of sources. You are now asked to read through the documents and select those parts of the story you believe should be emphasized in a description of pre-contact Aztec society. As you do so, take into account not only the possible biases of the sources, but your own as well. You will then be ready to address the question: *The Aztecs: What should history say?*

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Document A

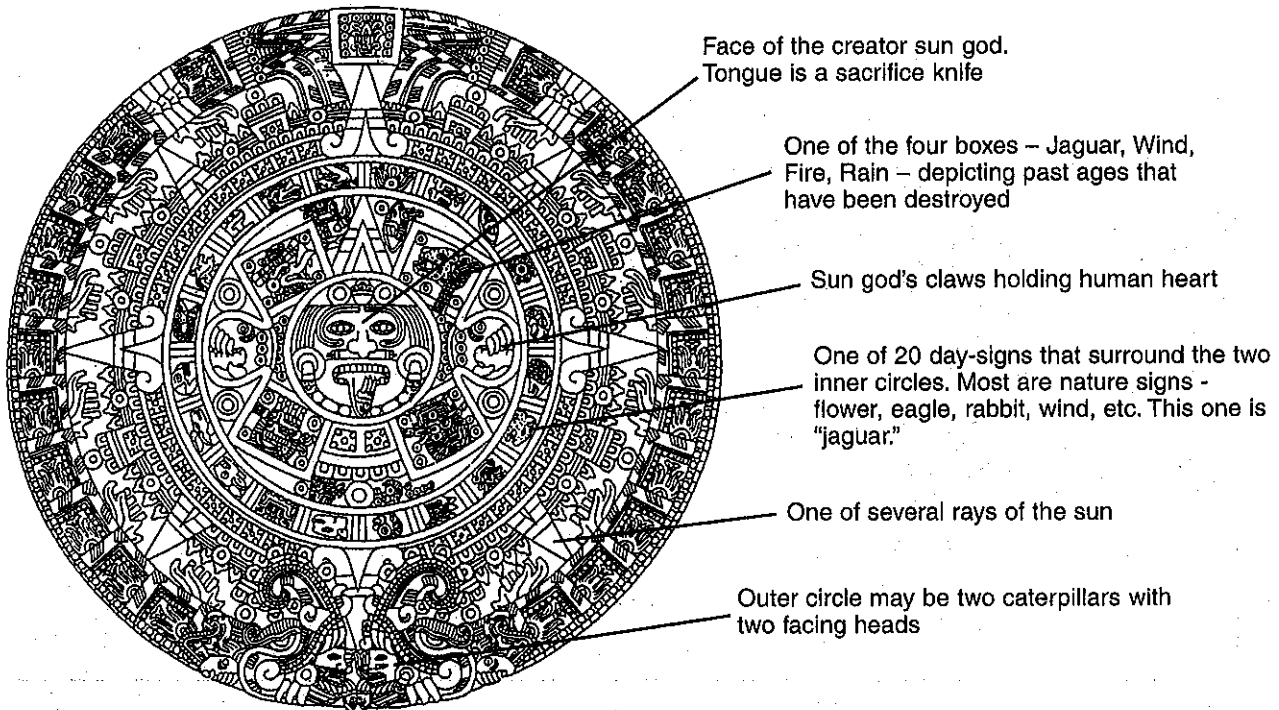
Source: David Carrasco and Scott Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998.

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Almost all narratives about the peoples and cultures of the Americas begin with the arrival of the Europeans in the New World in either 1492, 1519, or 1534. This way of beginning with Columbus' landfall, or Cortes' encounter with the Maya in Yucatan, or Pizarro's arrival in Peru gives exaggerated credit and prestige to the Europeans' initiatives, "discoveries," and colonial projects. But Native American peoples were also active on and before those dates—farming, loving, giving birth, painting, watching the stars, fighting, singing, working, and making prized works of ritual art.... In fact, the Aztecs created one of the two most powerful empires in the Western Hemisphere prior to the coming of the Europeans in the sixteenth century. They considered their capital the "queen" of all settlements, and the Spaniards described it as a place belonging to legend.

Document B

Source: Reprinted from Raul Noriega, *3 Estudios sobre la Piedra del Sol, Mexico*, 1954, in David Carrasco and Scott Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998.



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Note: The Calendar Stone was apparently used as a huge plate for placing sacrifice offerings to the sun god. It was not a typical calendar. The calendar was excavated in 1790 during repaving of the central plaza of Mexico City. It measured more than ten feet across.

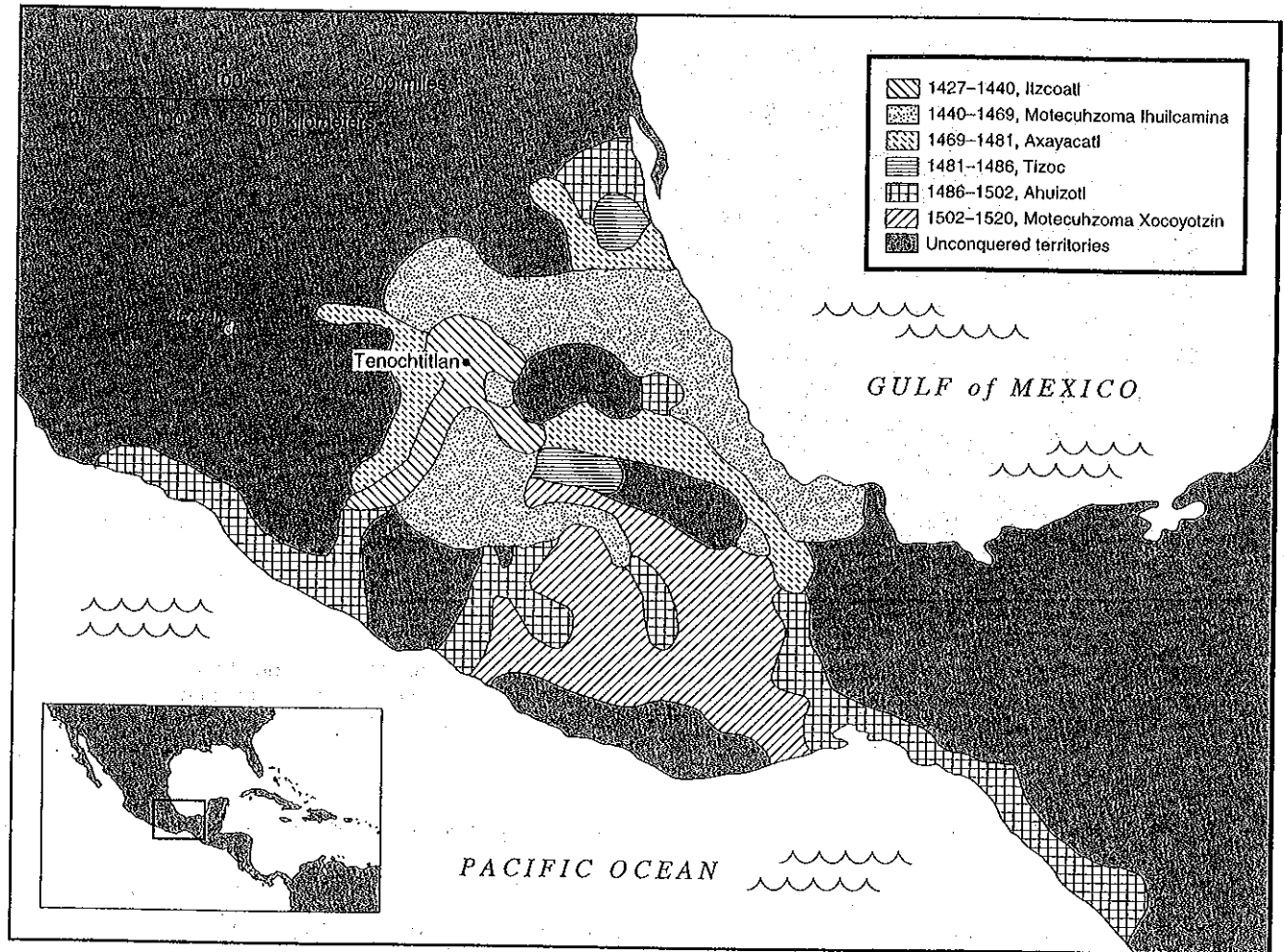
Source: Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs*, New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1992, p. 131.

There were two aspects of Aztec time counting, each with different functions. The first was the curious tonalpohualli "counting of the days," a 260-day cycle used for the purpose of divination. This repeating round of days formed a sacred almanac, widely used among Mesoamerican peoples long before the Aztecs.... The second division of the calendrical system was the 365-day solar count, known as the xihpohualli, "counting of the years," which regulated the recurrent cycle of annual seasonal festivals. These two counts were simultaneously in operation. They have often been explained as two engaged, rotating gears, in which the beginning day of the larger 365-day wheel would align with the beginning day of the smaller 260-day cycle every fifty-two years. This fifty-two year period constituted a Mesoamerican "century." The change from one fifty-two year period into the next was always the occasion of an important religious festival.

Document C

Source: Map created from various sources.

Territorial Acquisitions by Aztec Rulers



Notes: • This map illustrates the major Aztec conquests from the reign of Itzcoatl in 1427 to the reign of Motecuhzoma in 1520.

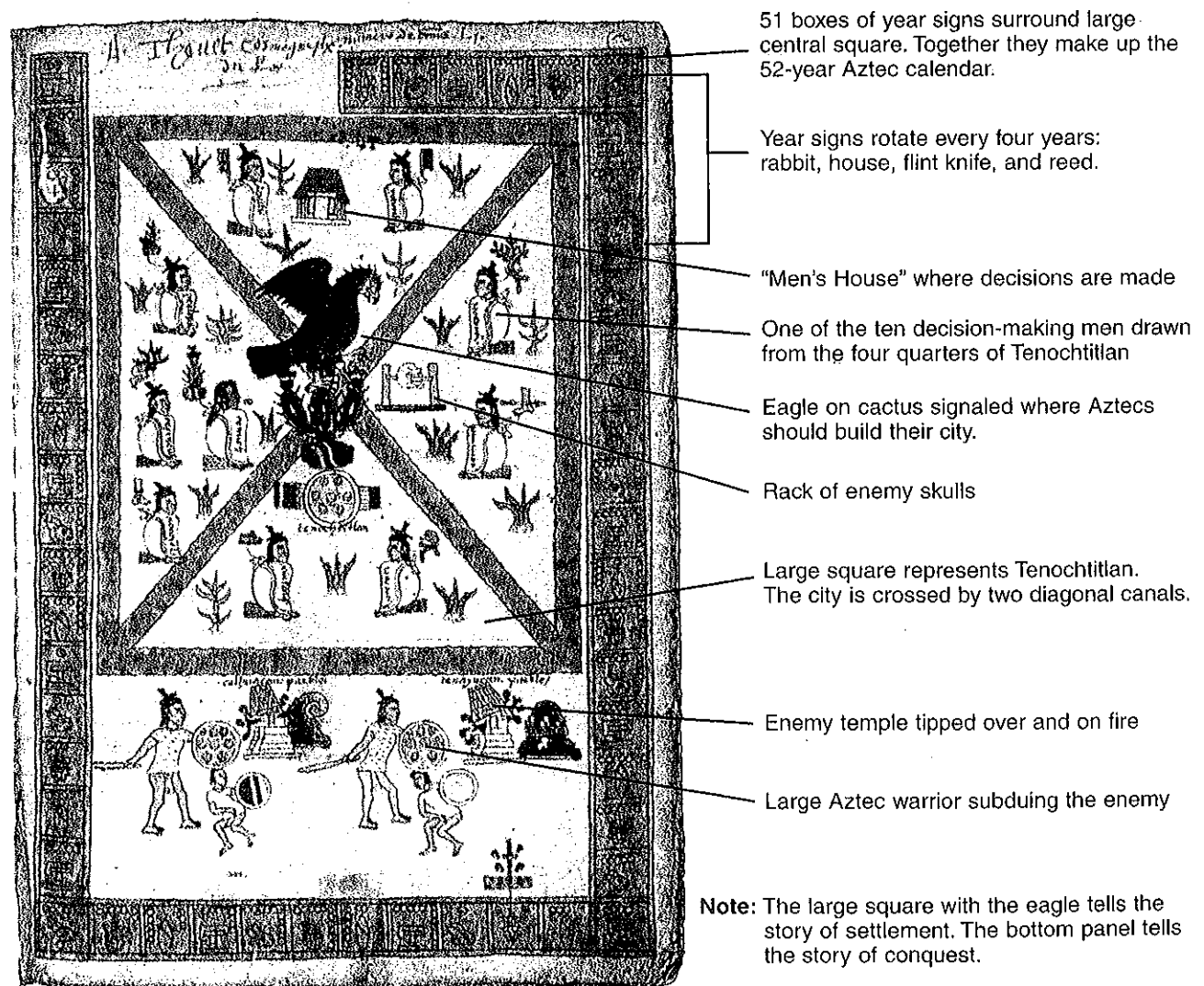
- Aztec warriors had the reputation of being fierce fighters, and most territories shown on the map were acquired by force. Independent territories on the map were sometimes the result of a deliberate policy of leaving unoccupied lands available for future "flower wars." "Flower wars" were waged to provide an ongoing supply of captured sacrifice victims.

Document D

Source: Friar Diego Duran, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, 1581, Doris Heyden, translator, University of Oklahoma Press, 1994.

[The priest Cuauhtlequetzqui is speaking] According to the revelation of our god when he appeared to me this night, a prickly pear cactus, standing upon a rock has grown from this heart and has become so tall and luxuriant that a fine eagle has made his nest there. When we discover it we shall be fortunate, for there we shall find our rest, our comfort, and our grandeur. There our name will be praised and our Aztec nation made great.... Our god orders us to call this place Tenochtitlan.

Source: *Codex Mendoza*, 1542, reprinted by permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, in David Carrasco and Scott Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998. Notes added.



Document E

Source: Recorded by Fray Bernardino Sahagun, *The Codice Matritense*, circa 1555, in Leon-Portilla, *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, Beacon Press, 1962. MS. Arch. Selden A. 1, fol. 2r. Reprinted by permission of The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

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They preserved an account of their history but later it was burned during the reign of Itzcoatl. The Lords of Mexico decreed it.

The Lords of Mexico declared:

*It is not fitting that our people should know these pictures.
Our people, our subjects will be lost and our land destroyed,
for these pictures are full of lies.*

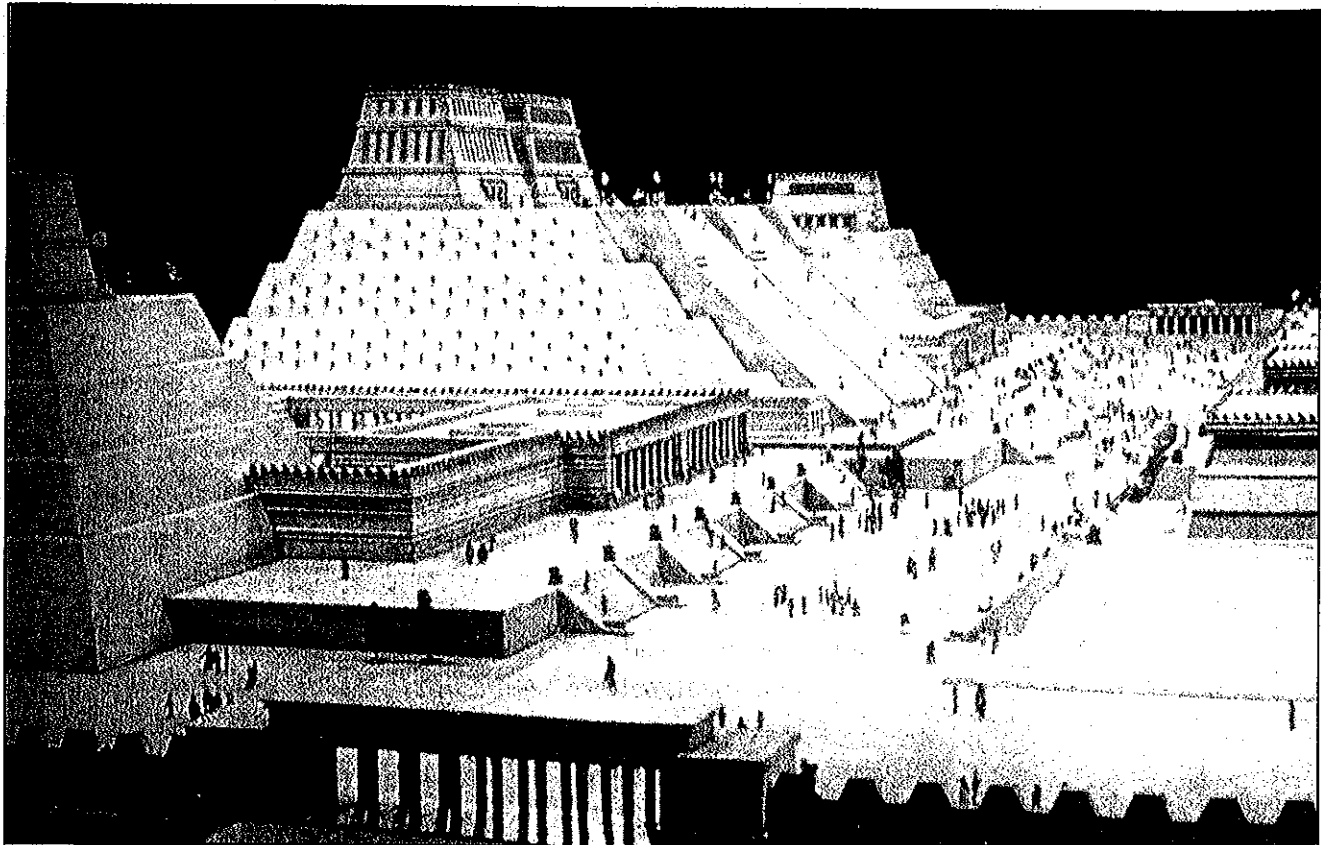
Note: The "Lords of Mexico" in this passage refers to the Aztec king, Itzcoatl (1427 – 1440) and his influential advisor Tlacael. This account is provided to the Spanish friar Sahagun by an Aztec speaking several years after the Spanish conquest.

Document F

Source: (Top) National Museum of Anthropology (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia), Mexico City. Courtesy of Salvador Guillem, Arroyo, INAH. In David Carrasco and Scott Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998.
 (Bottom) Peter N. Stearns et al., *World Civilizations: The Global Experience, AP Edition*, New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc., Longman, 2003.



Artist's reconstruction of the urban island settlement of Tenochtitlan and its smaller sister city (left) Tlatelolco. In 1519, the Aztec capital had an estimated population of 300,000, five times the size of London at that time.



Model reconstruction of the Great Temple and the ceremonial precinct of Tenochtitlan

Document G

Source: Bernardino Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, American Museum of Natural History. Painting by an Aztec artist, circa 1555. Reprinted by permission of Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.



Source: Bernal Diaz del Castillo, J.M.Cohen, translator, *History of the Conquest of New Spain*, Penguin, 1963. Reprinted by permission of Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

They strike open the wretched Indian's chest with flint knives and hastily tear out the palpitating heart that with the blood, they present to the idols in whose name they have performed the sacrifice. Then, they cut off the arms, thighs, and head, eating the arms and thighs at their ceremonial banquet. The head they hang up on a beam, and the body of the sacrificed man is not eaten but given to the beasts of prey.

Note: Bernal Diaz accompanied Hernan Cortes and the other conquistadors on the 1519 encounter with the Aztecs. He wrote an extensive and informative journal of the experience.

Document H

Source: Friar Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex, II*, circa 1555, in Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs, People of the Sun and Earth*, Greenwood Press, 1998.

A Seventeen-Year-Old Aztec Scribe's Impressions of Sacrifice Ritual
(as told to Friar Bernardino de Sahagun several years after 1529)

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When I saw this ceremony last year as a member of the priestly school, I was amazed by the physical beauty of the enemy warrior who was killed at the end of the festival. This seasoned warrior, whom we change from a human into the god Tezcatlipoca, can have no blemish upon his body, and he is treated like our most royal family member during the long year leading up to his sacrifice. During that time he is given all the finest luxuries from the nobles' storehouses, including foods, clothes, teachers, women, and instruction. He walks among us as a living god, and I was impressed and felt pride for my altepetl* when the younger people stopped their work or play and were mesmerized by him and his entourage of servants and guards as they strolled through the city or rode in the canoes along the canals.

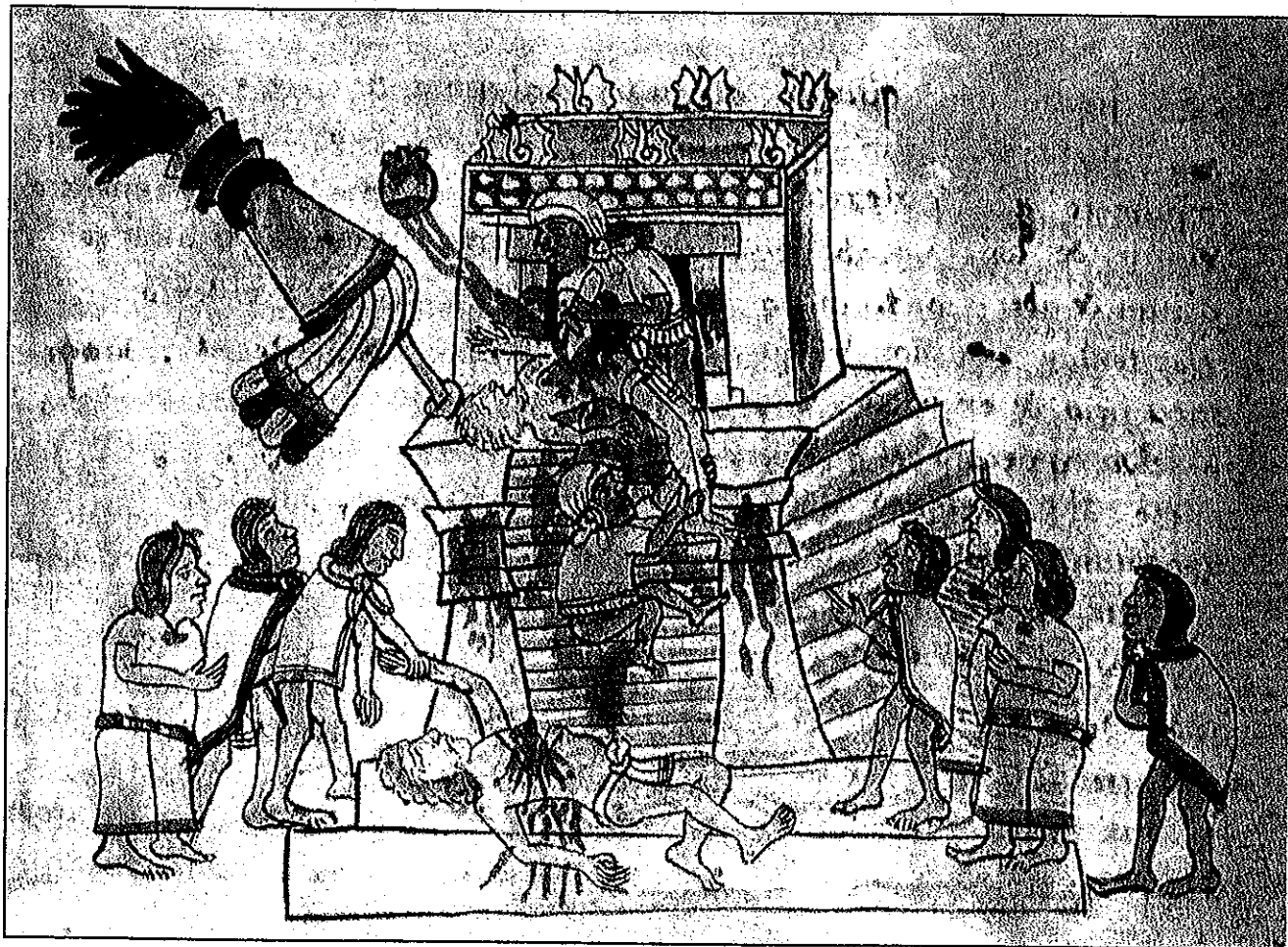
Many of us become attached to this living god, and a terrible sadness comes over some of the women when, at the end of the year, he is taken to Chalco and dismembered in public view. Let me share with you my images and memories of what happened last year when I followed his every movement. It will help me prepare my paintings in the book of sacred history.

*"altepetl" means village or community in Nahuatl, the Aztec language

Document I

Source: *Codex Mendoza*, 1542, reprinted by permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. In David Carrasco and Scott Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Document Note: The *Codex Mendoza* was commissioned by the Spanish Viceroy of Mexico in 1541 to provide King Charles V a clearer idea of his new subjects. The artwork in the *Codex* was drawn by Aztec artists accompanied by text written by Spanish priests.



Source: Friar Diego Duran, *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, 1581. Doris Heyden, Translator, University of Oklahoma Press, 1994.

The prisoners taken at Teuclepec were brought out. Motecuhzoma and Chihuacoatl began to sacrifice them, slicing open their chests and extracting their hearts. First, they raised the hearts to the sun, then they threw them into the shrine before the gods. This sacrifice began at midday and ended at night-fall. Two thousand three hundred men were killed and their blood bathed the entire temple and stairway. Each time the priest cut out a heart, they rolled the body down the stairs.

Document J

Source: Peter N. Stearns et al., *World Civilizations: The Global Experience, AP Edition*, New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc., Longman, 2003.

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How have historians tried to explain or understand Aztec human sacrifice? Some defenders of Aztec culture have seen it as a limited phenomenon, greatly exaggerated by the Spanish for political purposes. Many scholars have seen it as a religious act central to the Aztec's belief that humans must sacrifice that which was most precious to them – life – to receive the sun, the rain, and other blessings of the gods that made life possible.

Others have viewed the Aztec practice as the intentional manipulation and expansion of a widespread phenomenon that had long existed among many American peoples. In other words, the Aztec rulers, priests, and nobility used the cult of war and large-scale human sacrifice for political purposes to terrorize their

neighbors and subdue the lower classes. Another possible explanation is demographic. If central Mexico was as densely populated as we believe, then the sacrifices may have been a kind of population control.

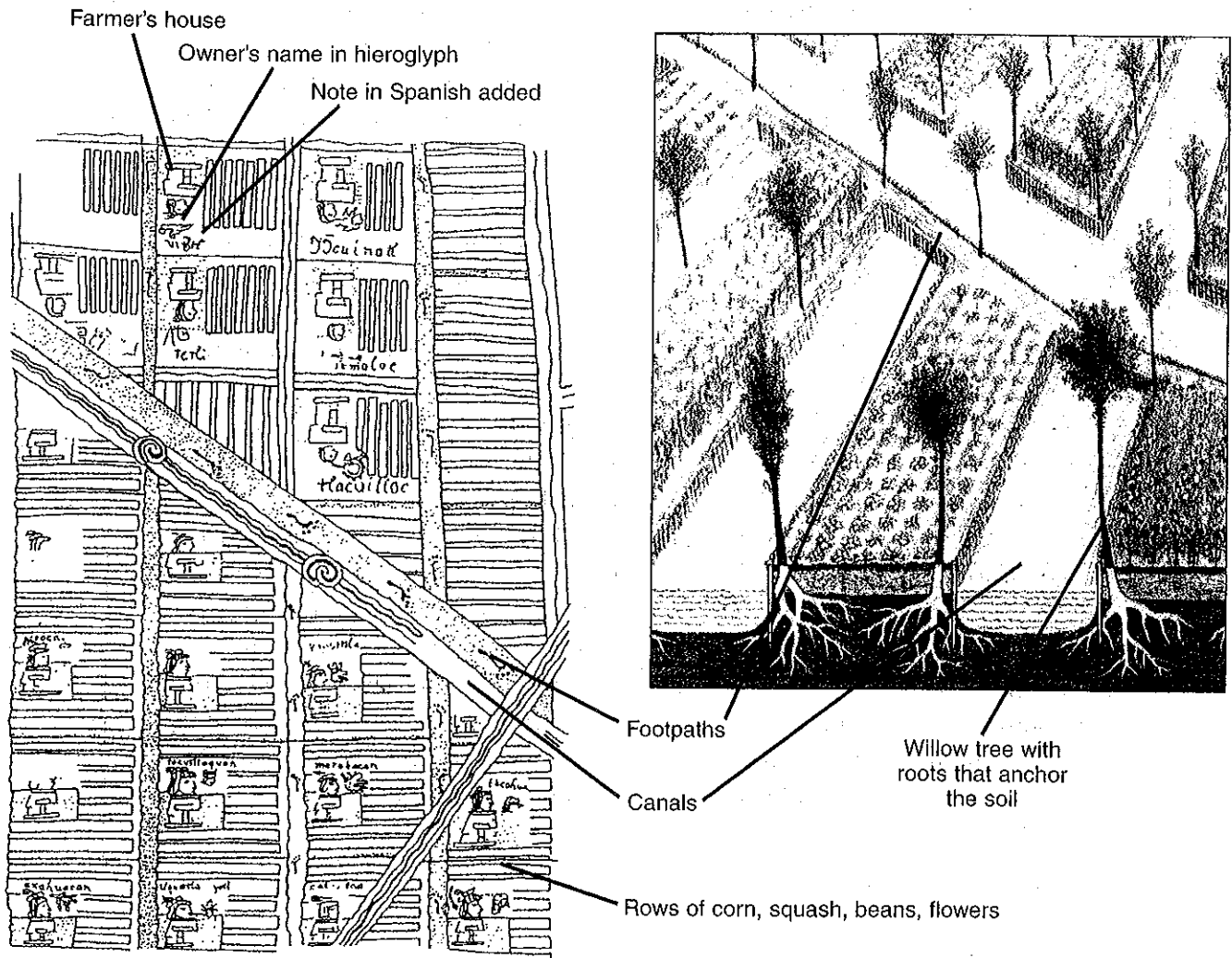
Other interpretations have been even more startling. Anthropologist Marvin Harris has suggested that Aztec sacrifice, accompanied by ritual cannibalism, was a response to a lack of protein. He argued that in the Old World, human sacrifice was replaced by animal sacrifice, but in Mesoamerica, which lacked cattle and sheep, that transformation never took place.... Other scholars have strongly objected to Harris's interpretation of the evidence, which gave little attention to the ritual aspects of these acts. Still, human sacrifice shades all assessments of Aztec civilization.

Document K

Source: *Matricula de Tributos*, circa 1542, Museo Antropologia in Mexico City, Warwick Bray, *Everyday Life of the Ancient Aztecs*, London: B.T. Batsford, 1968, in David Carrasco and Scott Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.

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Chinampas Agriculture



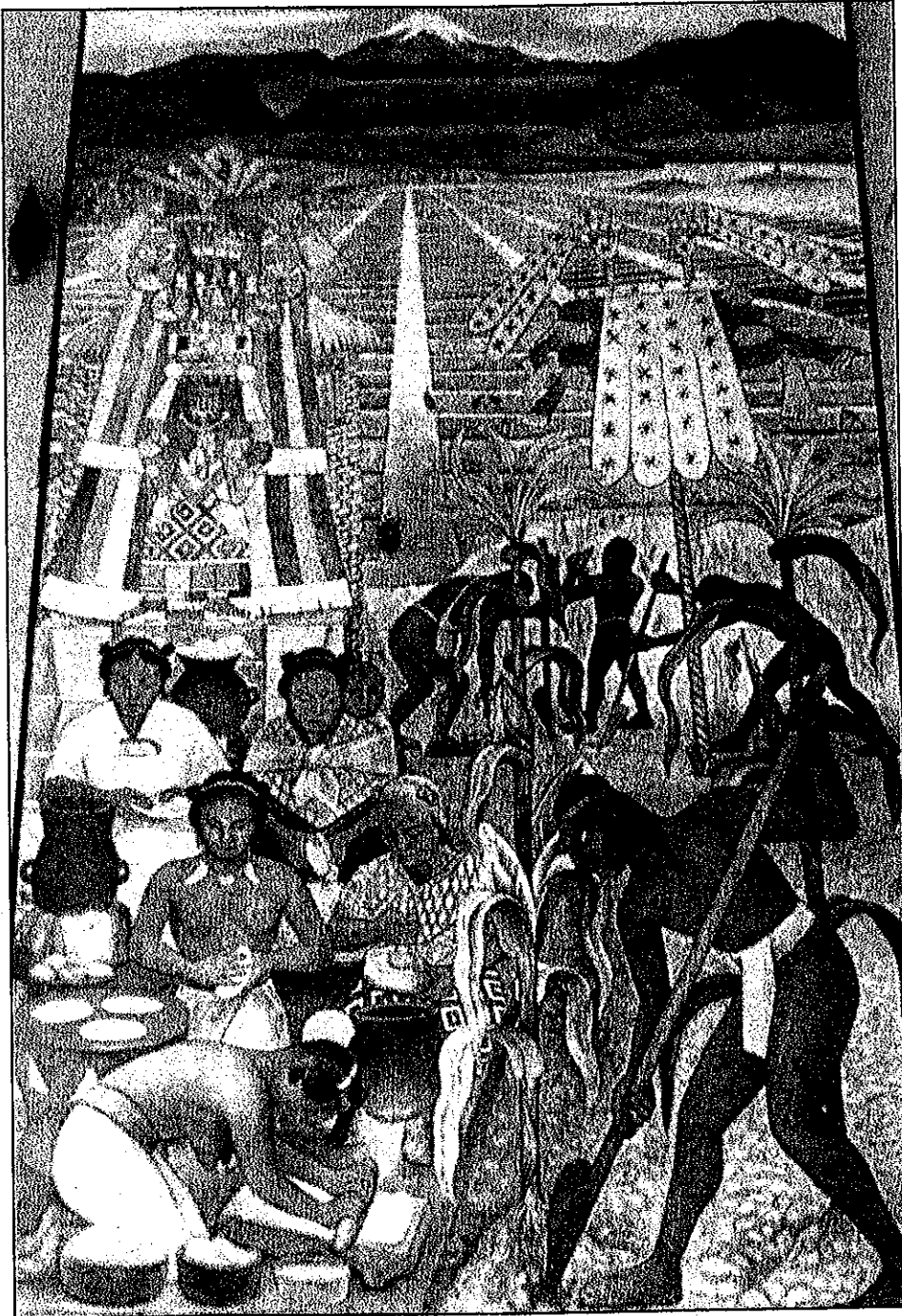
Source: Peter N. Stearns et al., *World Civilizations: The Global Experience*, Third Edition, New York: Addison Wesley Educational Publishers, 2001.

In and around Lake Texcoco, the Aztecs developed an ingenious system for irrigating agriculture called chinampas. These were floating islands approximately seventeen feet long and one hundred to three hundred thirty feet wide that rested in reed frames that were anchored to the bottom of the lake. Willow trees were planted at intervals to provide shade. Approximately twenty thousand acres of chinampas were constructed and the yield from them was high: four corn crops per year were possible.

Document L

Source: National Palace, Mexico City, courtesy of Scott Sessions. Mural painted by Diego Rivera, c. 1929.

Diego Rivera Mural



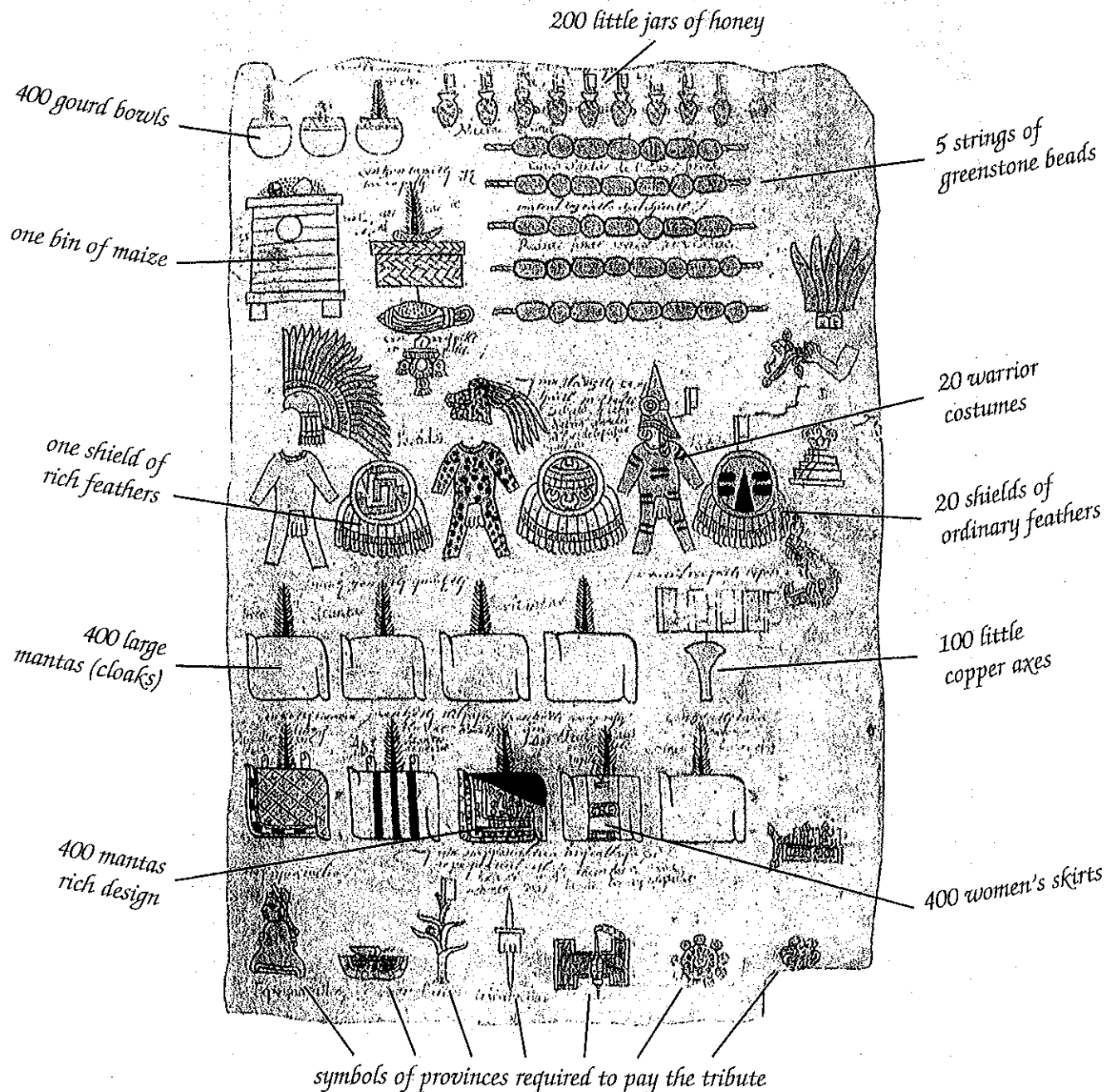
The mural shows agriculture and food production in the Basin of Mexico. The men on the right plant and harvest the maize plants, while the women on the left grind and roll the product into tortillas. Behind them is a person dressed as a corn goddess. Rows of chinampas plots stretch across the lake as far as the eye can see. Two great volcanoes can be seen at the top.

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Document M

Source: Drawing from the *Matricula de Tributos*, circa 1542, Museo Antropologia in Mexico City, Warwick Bray, *Everyday Life of the Ancient Aztecs*, London: B.T. Batsford, 1968, in David Carrasco and Scott Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Document Note: The Aztecs, like many civilizations, demanded tribute from conquered territories. Tribute was payment in goods and/or services rather than in currency. This document from the *Matricula de Tributos* is a bill that was presented to different provinces that Tenochtitlan controlled. The inscriptions along the bottom all represent the signs for the different provinces that were required to submit all the things on the bill. The symbols represent different items that people in the provinces needed to deliver or they could expect military repercussions.



Document N

Source: Bernal Diaz del Castillo, J.M. Cohen, translator, *History of the Conquest of New Spain*, London: Penguin, 1963.

After having examined and considered all that we had seen we turned to look at the great market place and crowds of people that were in it, some buying and others selling, so that the murmur and hum of their voice and words that they used could be heard more than a league [three miles] off. Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy and in Rome, said that so large a market place and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged, they had never beheld before.

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Note: Bernal Diaz accompanied Hernan Cortes and the other conquistadors on the 1519 encounter with the Aztecs. He wrote an extensive and informative journal of the experience.

Document O

Source: Jonathan Norton Leonard, *Ancient America*, Time-Life Books, 1967.

Home life for the ideal Aztec family was both well disciplined and warm. Parents had a close relationship with children and brought them up according to a strict regime. At the age of three a child was given life-like toys such as a small loom or grinding stone and was assigned certain household tasks; at six he took on broader domestic responsibilities, and at 15 began regular schooling....

As their children grew up, the parents were expected to counsel and guide them into honorable careers....

The rigid order that governed an Aztec child's upbringing continued into his adult years. Marriage was expected when a young man reached 20 and a girl 16. Matches were arranged by the two families – presumably with some occasional sub rosa guidance from the young people. Once agreement was reached, the youth's relatives sent two old women to negotiate the marriage with the bride's parents.

On the evening designated for the ceremony the girl was carried to the groom's home; daughters of the nobility were borne on litters, while poor girls rode on the back on an old woman, their path lighted by other women carrying burning pine branches. During the ceremony held before the hearth, the groom's tunic was knotted to the bride's blouse, officially uniting them....

After marriage, the strict Aztec code continued to govern every aspect of family behavior. If the children stepped out of line, parents were entitled to give them the smoke treatment, prick their flesh with thorns, or leave them outside all night to sleep in a mud puddle. When the adults themselves erred, the consequences were considerably more severe: thieves, drunkards and adulterous couples were put to death – commoners in public, aristocrats by private execution.

Document P

Source: Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, 1569, in Carlos Maria de Bustamante, *A History of Ancient Mexico*, Fisk University Press, 1932.

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I, (a village elder) the first one to speak, wish to give you my opinion as I would to a son. You are about to depart to far-away lands and to leave your village, relatives and friends, your comfort and rest to travel over long roads, mountains, valleys and deserts. Exert yourself, my son, for there is no reason why you should end your life here, nor that you should die without having accomplished something worthwhile.... Your forebears in these hardships have toiled on the road and have attained the honors accorded them, as valiant men attain them in war.... You must be courageous to stand the hardships that await you such as hunger, thirst, fatigue and lack of provisions; you will have to eat your bread hard, your tamales mouldy and drink turbid and bad tasting water.

Document Q

Source: Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex*, 1569, in Carlos Maria de Bustamante, *A History of Ancient Mexico*, Fisk University Press, 1932.

We relate here the ceremonies observed by women when visiting a woman lately delivered. As soon as the news spread that some relative had given birth to a child, all her relations, neighbors, women and friends went at once to visit her and to see the newborn baby. Before entering the house they rubbed their knees hard with ashes and the same they did to their children if they brought them along; also all the joints of their bodies, for they said that by so doing they strengthened the joints.... Another superstition was to keep the fire burning continuously for four days in the house of the lately delivered woman.... No one was allowed to take any of this fire out for they believed that by so doing good luck was being carried away from the newly born baby.